

## **Museums, memories and social movements**

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### **I**

From modernity to the contemporary world, museums have been acknowledged for their power to produce metamorphoses of meanings and functions, for their ability to adapt historic and social determination, and for their calling for cultural mediation. They derive from creating gestures which bind the symbolic and the material, which bind what is sensitive and what is intelligible. For this very reason the bridge metaphor fits them well, a bridge cast between different times, spaces, individuals, social groups and cultures, a bridge that is built with images and which holds a special place in the imaginary.

For this period of time museums have served merely to preserve the registers of memory and the vision of the world of the wealthier classes; likewise they have functioned as ideological devices for the state and also to discipline and control the past, the present and the future of moving societies. At present, besides these classical practices a new phenomenon can already be observed. The museum is going through a democratization process, a process of re-signification and cultural appropriation. This is no longer merely about democratizing the access to instituted museums, but rather about democratizing the very museum understood as technology, as work tool, as strategic device for a new, creative and participating relationship with the past, the present and the future. This is a bold fight to democratize

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democracy<sup>2</sup>; this is about understanding the museum as a pencil<sup>3</sup>, as a simple tool which requires certain skills in order to be used.

The pencil metaphor suggests the need to learn the technique of using it, together with a process of learning how to read and write. Still, even if the individual is literate, even if he/she can read and write the world, there is no assurance regarding the ideological bias of the stories and narratives he/she may write and read. In other words: museums are tools which, in order to be used, require special skills and techniques, with them we can create varied, multiple and polyphonic narratives. Learning museum skills and techniques implies a certain command, a certain ability to navigate the visual universe. This ability can be called visual or museum literacy<sup>4</sup>. Provisional synthesis: it is not enough to fight for social movements to have access to museums. This is fine, but it is still too little. The challenge is to democratize the tool known as museum and place it at the service of social movements; place it in favour of, for instance, the construction of another world, of another globalization, with more justice, humanity, solidarity and social dignity. As Pierre Mayrand put it: "Today the steam roller of globalization once again forces the museologist to join his energy to the plea of populations and organizations committed to the transformation of the museum framework into a Forum – Agora – Citizen, and also forces him to place himself in the field of otherworldliness with a didactic, dialectic position, capable, through the vital

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<sup>2</sup> See SANTOS, Boaventura de Souza (org.). *Democratizar a democracia: os caminhos da democracia participativa*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Realizing that museums can be used as much to light up as to erase memories, Professor Regina Abreu has suggested that they be considered rubbers. Bringing these two images together we can think of museums as pencils that carry rubbers in them.

<sup>4</sup> The individual's ability to read and write the world by images and things, their values, meanings and functions. About the concept of visual literacy see the text "Museus são bons para pensar: o patrimônio em cena na Índia", by Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge (2007) [Museums are good to think: Heritage on View in India].

energies he generates, of fostering dialogue between peoples”<sup>5</sup>.

It is in this sense that the museum can transform itself – and this is already happening – into a cultural practice of great interest to social movements, since the registers of the memory of these movements may contribute to the fight they are engaged in. As Maria Glória Gohn explains:

“In historic reality, [social] movements have always existed and we believe will always exist. This because they represent organized social forces which congregate people not as force-task, of a numerical order, but rather as a field of activities and social experimentation, and these activities are generating source of creativity and socio-cultural innovation. The experience they bear does not derive from strengths frozen in the past – although this has crucial importance by creating a memory which when recovered, gives meaning to today’s struggles. The experience is recreated daily, in the adversity of the situations they face”. (2003, p.14)

Activated by social movements as mediators between different times, different social groups and different experiences, museums become practices engaged with life, with the present, with day-to-day activities, with social transformation and are themselves moving beings and places (biophile museums).

Nevertheless, before a devouring being such as the museum, often called dinosaur or sphinx, one cannot be naïve. It is wise to keep the blade of criticism and suspicion close by. The museum is tool and artifact, it can serve for

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<sup>5</sup> “Manifeste L’ Altermuséologie”, launched by Pirre Mayrand, in Setúbal (Portugal), on 27 October 2007. In this manifest, the author proposes an “altermuseology”, “a gesture of cooperation, of resistance, of liberation and solidarity with the World Social Forum”.

generosity and for freedom, but it can also be used to enslave life, history and culture; to imprison the past and imprison beings and things in the past and in death (necrophile museums). To enter the narrative realm of museums it is necessary to trust by distrusting.

The configuration of the modern museum dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, is associated with the emergence of national states, and has in the British Museum and in the Louvre Museum two classic examples. From the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present time, they have constituted privileged fields both for the exercise of a creating imaginary that takes into consideration the power of images, and from the dramaturgy of the artistic, philosophical, religious, scientific past – in short, the cultural past. It is within the frame of modernity that the museum is configured as stage, technology and vessel of time and memory. As stage, it is space for the theatricalization and narration of collective and individual dramas, love stories, comedies and tragedies; as technology, it becomes a device and tool for social intervention; as vessel, it fosters imaginary and memorable journeys along the river of memory and time. All this implies the production of new meanings and knowledge, from previous senses, feelings and knowledge. It is because it can be stage, technology and vessel that museums can be understood as pencil (and rubber), with which it is possible to produce writing capable of narrating hybrid stories, stories with multiple entries, meanders and exits.

## II

Although the exercise of museum imagination in Brazil in the 19<sup>th</sup> century showed some good examples, it was especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that this imagination developed so remarkably.

The researcher Guy de Hollanda, in his book *Recursos Educativos dos Museus Brasileiros* [*Educational Resources of Brazilian Museums*] published in 1958, identified 145 museums in Brazil. To analyse that collection of museums I have made a table which organizes these 145 museums by

the century and decade when they were created. Some museums come up in Guy de Hollanda's book with no reference to date of creation, so I have searched data available today to complement that information. The result is indicated in the table below:

LIST OF BRAZILIAN MUSEUMS (according to Guy de Hollanda, 1958)	
Century/decade	museums created
19 <sup>th</sup> century	
1811 to 1820	1
1841 to 1850	1
1861 to 1870	2
1871 to 1880	1
1881 to 1890	1
1891 to 1900	2
Note: Two museums in the set of museums with no indication of creation date may have been created in the 19th century	2
Subtotal (including those mentioned in the note)	10
20 <sup>th</sup> century	
1901 to 1910	8
1911 to 1920	4
1921 to 1930	7
1931 to 1940	25
1941 to 1950	29
1951 to 1958	31
Museums being organized in 1958	9
Museums with no indication of creation date	22
Subtotal	135
Total (19 <sup>th</sup> century and 20 <sup>th</sup> century until 1958)	145

This is a rather partial, but quite expressive, depiction of the museums in existence in Brazil at the end of the 1950s. Even considering the hypothesis that some of the museums founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century died young – as is the case of the Army and Navy military museums which, after their death, were resurrected during the military regime and therefore are not mentioned in Guy de Hollanda's collection – the general

picture is still valid, since it represents the museum heritage received.

An analysis of the table indicates that the spread of Brazilian museums in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (representing 6.89% of the total of 145 museums) was not as accelerated as one may think. The first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century together come up to 19 museums (13.10% of the total of 145), which constitutes a quite higher acceleration vis-à-vis the previous century. Still, nothing is comparable to the boom of the last three decades covered by the mentioned collection, which in total show 94 museums (64.82% of the total of 145 institutions), including those which in 1958 were being organized. It should also be pointed out that whereas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the 10 museums listed were scattered over 7 cities and 7 federal units (including the Federal District), the 135 museums created in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are spread over 71 cities and 21 federal units (including the Federal District and the Amapá Territory).

There is no doubt that from the beginning of the 1930s, a huge transformation in the field of museums takes place in Brazil, a direct reflex of political, social and economic changes. In the 1930s the State becomes more modern, stronger and establishes a new order. Strengthened and restructured, it now intervenes directly in social life, in work relations and in the fields of education, health and culture. Various sectors of society now contribute to re-imagining Brazil. There is a broad longing for the symbolic construction of the nation, from which derive the re-imagining of its past, its symbols, its allegories, its heroes, its myths. The new order requires a new imaginary and it will be necessary to re-people the past once again. This explains, at least partially, the expressive multiplication of museums from the beginning of the 1930s. At that moment, the device of *museum imagination* will be activated as a renewed tool of great political and social use. To reduce museums and the practices aimed at preserving fragments of the past to mere ideological machines of the State is to desist from understanding their complexities, their internal dynamics

and their complex fields of possibilities, as much of constraint as of emancipation.

The remarkable proliferation of museums that started in the 1930s continued and widened in the 1940s and 1950s, across the Second World War and in the so-called Vargas Era, vigorously reaching its golden years. Nowadays, there are in Brazil, according to recent data of the Cadastro Nacional de Museus [National Museum Census], 2470 museums<sup>6</sup>. It therefore becomes clear that this is an expanding universe and that the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more than the 19<sup>th</sup>, may be called in Brazil the century of museums. It is important to note also that this proliferation is not only expressed in terms of quantity, it also implies a new way of understanding museums and a greater effort to professionalize the field. There is clearly an emphasis on the educational dimension of museums, together with the broadening of museum-diversity and the development of regional and local experiments besides the former Federal District.

### III

The conceptual surgery operated in modern museums was so radical that, after it was implemented, everything would come to be seen from the very framework of the museum. Palaces and stilt houses, manor houses and *senzalas*, castles and bungalows, factories and schools, samba schools and cemeteries, forests and ports, *candomblé* yards and mediumistic centres, Masonic lodges and Catholic churches, people, animals, plants and stones, trains, airplanes and cars, pieces of the moon and fragments of the soul, urban and rural landscapes, country and town, in short, everything came to be understood as part of an applied museology or a special museography.

Donald Preziosi, in a text published in the catalogue of the XXIV São Paulo Art Biennial, identifies the cannibalistic power of the museum and looks for strategies to “avoid being eaten up”. Still, according to Preziosi (1998, p.50): “We cannot

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<sup>6</sup> Accessed on 7 November 2007.

escape museums, since the very world of our modernity is, in its deepest aspects, a supreme museological 'artefact'".

Further on, this author claims: "To avoid being eaten up by a museum is definitely a universal problem, since we live in a world in which virtually anything can be staged or exhibited in a museum or in which virtually anything can serve or be classified as a museum". (Preziosi, 1998, p.50).

Even though I agree with Preziosi's diagnosis, I do not agree with his stance and even less with his suggestion that museum cannibalism should be avoided. From the Timbira's perspective, for instance, in order not to be eaten it is enough to cower in the face of the risk of death, it is enough to lack the dignity to die. This is probably not Preziosi's proposal. But even so, I would like to state: only those who are courageously ready to be devoured are also capable of savouring the banquet.

Acknowledging the cannibalistic power of the museum, its aggressiveness and its gesture of violence towards the past is, as I see it, an important step; but maybe the biggest challenge is to recognize that these institutions create and welcome what is human, and for this very reason can be devoured. To devour and re-create meaning for the museums, now here is a challenge for the new generations; here is the challenge that is being faced for instance by Centro de Estudos e Ações Solidárias da Maré [Centre for Studies and Charitable Work of Maré], when it creates the Maré Museum, in a *favela* [shanty town] with more than 15 communities and over 132,000 thousand inhabitants.

Nowadays, the claim that museums are places of memory has become a cliché. If, in the 1980s and 1990s Pierre Nora's research on the places of memory could produce creative impact, today his impact tends to be absorbed, neutralized and naturalized.

It became common practice in corporate praise to say that museum "x" or "y" is a place (or house) of memory; as if memory per se had value and was the expression of pure truth and supreme good; as if forgetting was evil or a criminal virus which should be fought, deleted, destroyed. Anyway, seen as



houses of memory, museums entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century in marked movement of expansion and keep exerting, on behalf of more or less hidden subjects, their power which serves both to liberate and to enslave the past and history, art and science.

Maybe it was adequate, in order to understand them better from a critical perspective, to accept the obvious: museums are places of remembering and forgetting, just as they are places of power, of fight, of conflict, of silence, of resistance; in certain instances, they may even be non-places. Every attempt to reduce museums to a single aspect runs the risk of not accounting for the complexity of the museum setting in the contemporary world.

When considering the movement of proliferation and reassigning of meaning of museums in Brazil in the past thirty years, I believe two aspects stand out: the museum diversity and the democratization of the museum technology.

The phenomenon of the broadening of the museum diversity brought about the erosion of museum typologies based on disciplines and collections, the broadening of the spectrum of institutional voices, the flexibilization of the museographic narratives of great national or regional synthesis, the experimentation with new museological and museographic models, the dissemination of museums and memory houses all over the country. Democratizing the museum technology has implied appropriating (or cannibalizing) this tool by different ethnic, social, religious and family groups, with a view to constituting and institutionalizing their own memories. Some examples: Koahi - Museu dos Povos Indígenas do Oiapoque [Museum of the Indigenous Peoples of Oiapoque] (Oiapoque, AP), Museu Casa de Chico Mendes [Chico Mendes House Museum] (Xapuri, AC), Museu da Maré [Maré Museum] (Rio de Janeiro, RJ), Casa de Memória Daniel Pereira de Mattos do Centro Espírita e Culto de Oração Casa de Jesus Fonte de Luz [Daniel Pereira de Mattos' House of Memory of the Mediunistic Centre and Prayer Cult Jesus Source of Light House] (Rio Branco, AC), Museu Indígena de Coroa Vermelha [Red Crown Indigenous Museum] (Santa Cruz de Cabralia, BA), Museu Magüta dos

índios Ticuna [Magüta Museum of the Ticuan Indians] (Benjamim Constant, AM), Ecomuseu da Amazônia [Amazonian Ecomuseum] (Belém, PA), Museu Vivo de Duque de Caxias [Duque de Caxias Living Museum] (Duque de Caxias, RJ).

The examples of cultural appropriation could be doubled or trebled. I believe, however, that those mentioned above are enough to corroborate the claim that it is a pertinent (and impertinent) challenge to think of museums as cannibalistic (or even cannibal) lairs and beings that can be cannibalized.

Somehow, museums make us despair and still keep the treasures of our humanity, treasures which await us and which, in order to be found and enjoyed, require the courage to be, the courage to deal with them sensitively and creatively. It is necessary that we approach them without naiveté, but also without the arrogance of a know-it-all. It is necessary that we appropriate them. One of our challenges is to accept them as fields of tension. Tension between change and permanence, between mobility and immobility, between what is fixed and what is volatile, between difference and identity, between past and future, between memory and forgetting, between power and resistance.

And it is for that reason, because they are tension and process, because they are in motion that museums – houses of dreams, of creation, of education and culture – are of interest to social movements: ethnic-racial movements (Indian and Black); movements that address gender issues (women and homosexual); rural movements for land, agrarian reform and access to credit for rural settlements; solidarity and support movements regarding street boys and girls; movements fighting for habitability conditions in the city; movements which defend greater participation in the political-administrative structures of cities (participative budget, managing councils, culture councils, etc.); movements which fight against neoliberal policies and the effects of globalization; movements in defence of the environment and the democratization of urban equipment; movements which fight

for universal accessibility; movements which are not against but are not in favour either... and so many other movements.

I suppose those who think there is only one possibility of memory and that this unique possibility would imply repeating the past and what has been produced are wrong; I suppose those who think humanity is possible outside the tension between forgetting and memory are wrong. It is this tension, contrarily to what we might think, that ensures the hatching of the new and of creation. The future also gazes and winks at us from inside the past (if the past even has an inside). Total forgetting is sterile, total memory is sterile.

A territory which is fertile and propitious to the creating and generous imagination has striation produced by memory; the possibility of human creation inhabits and lives in accepting the tension between remembering and forgetting, between the same and the denial of sameness, between permanence and change, between stagnation and movement.

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